

FIG. 1

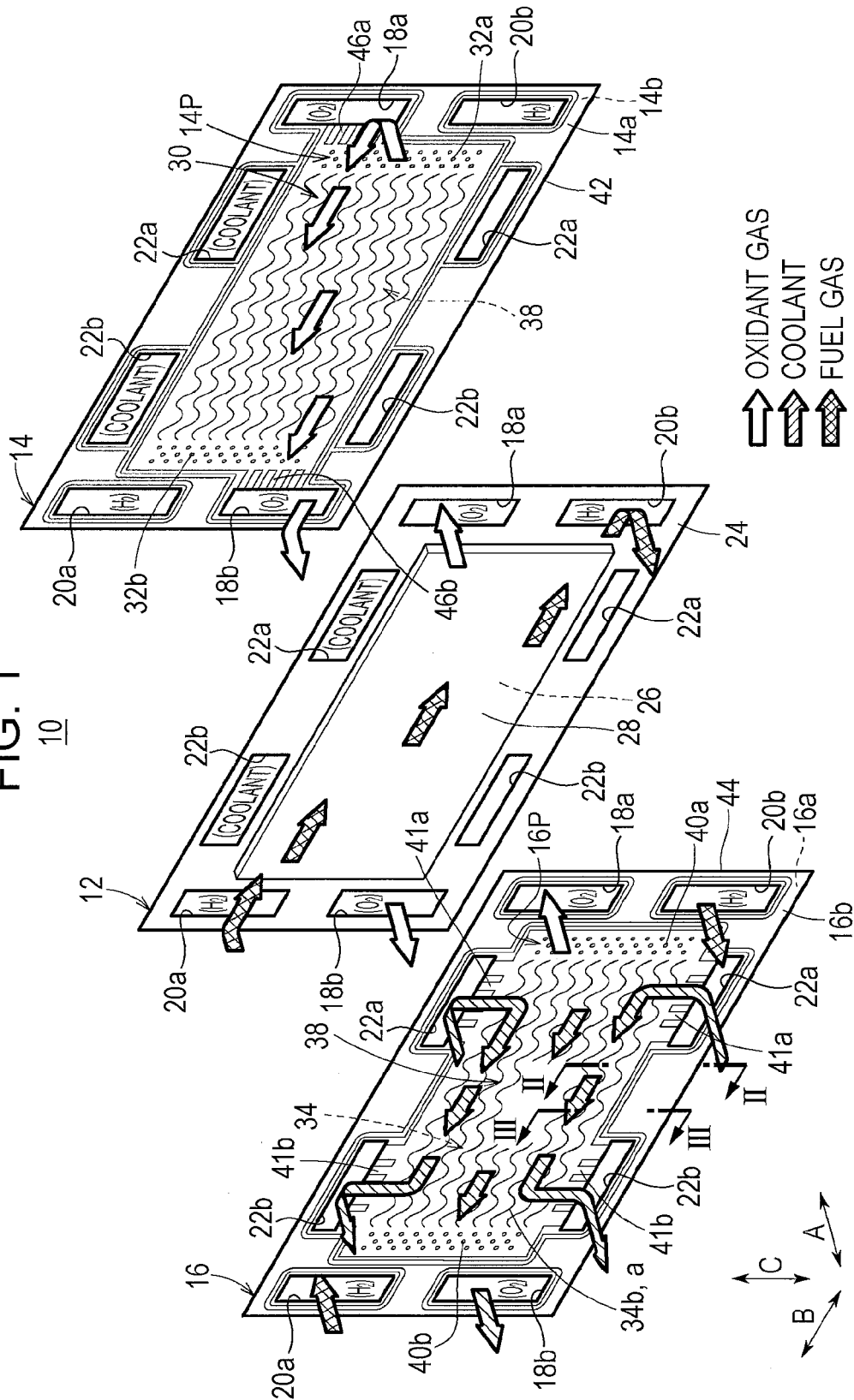


FIG. 2

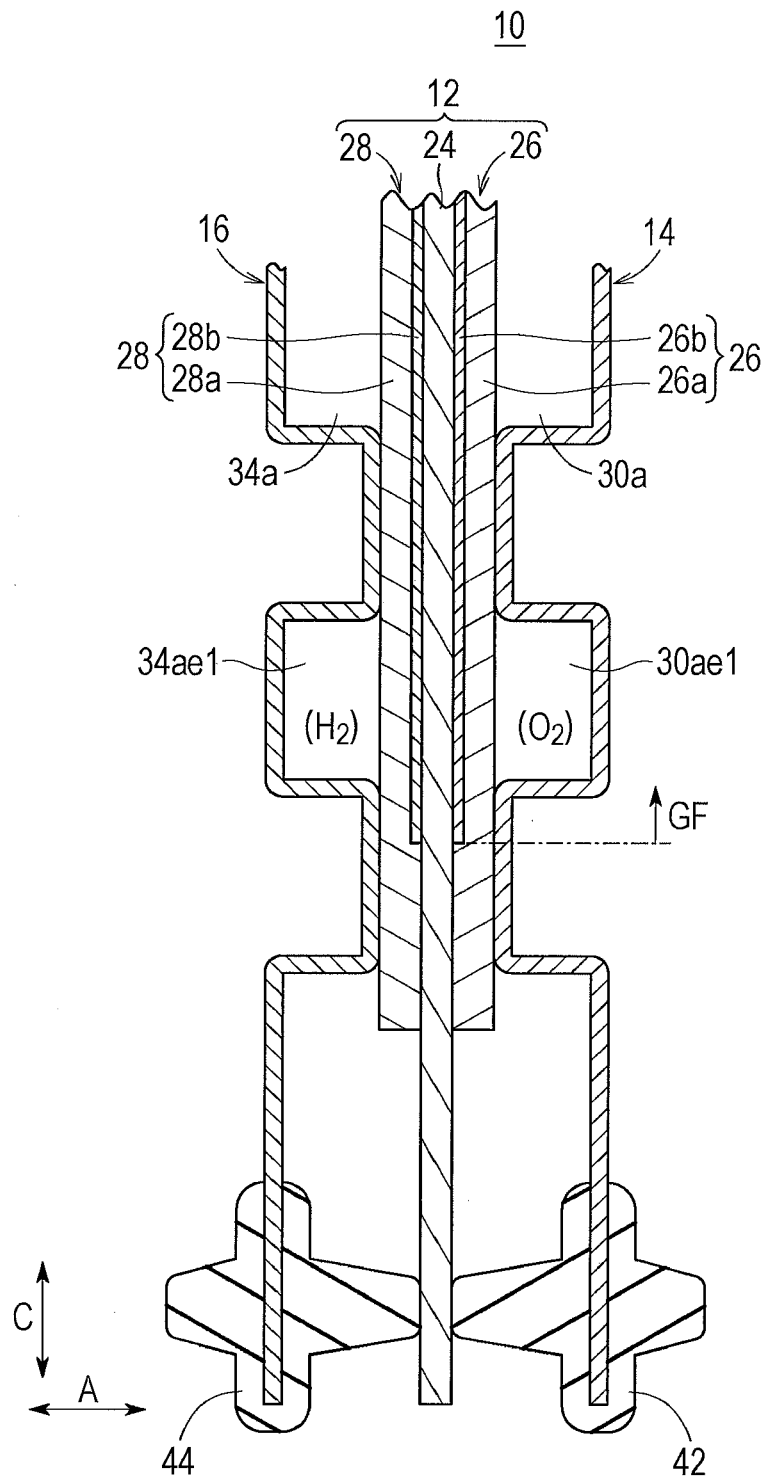


FIG. 3

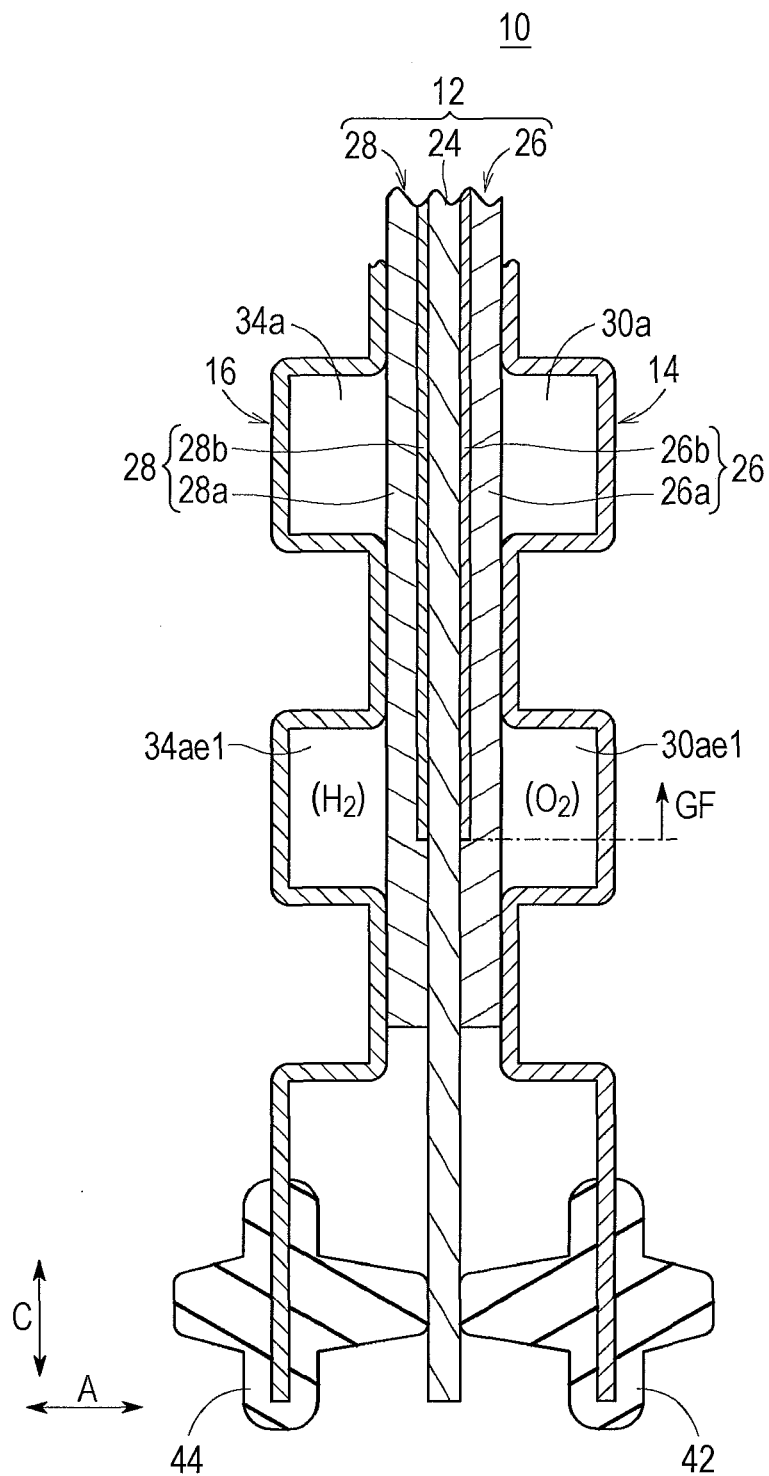


FIG. 4

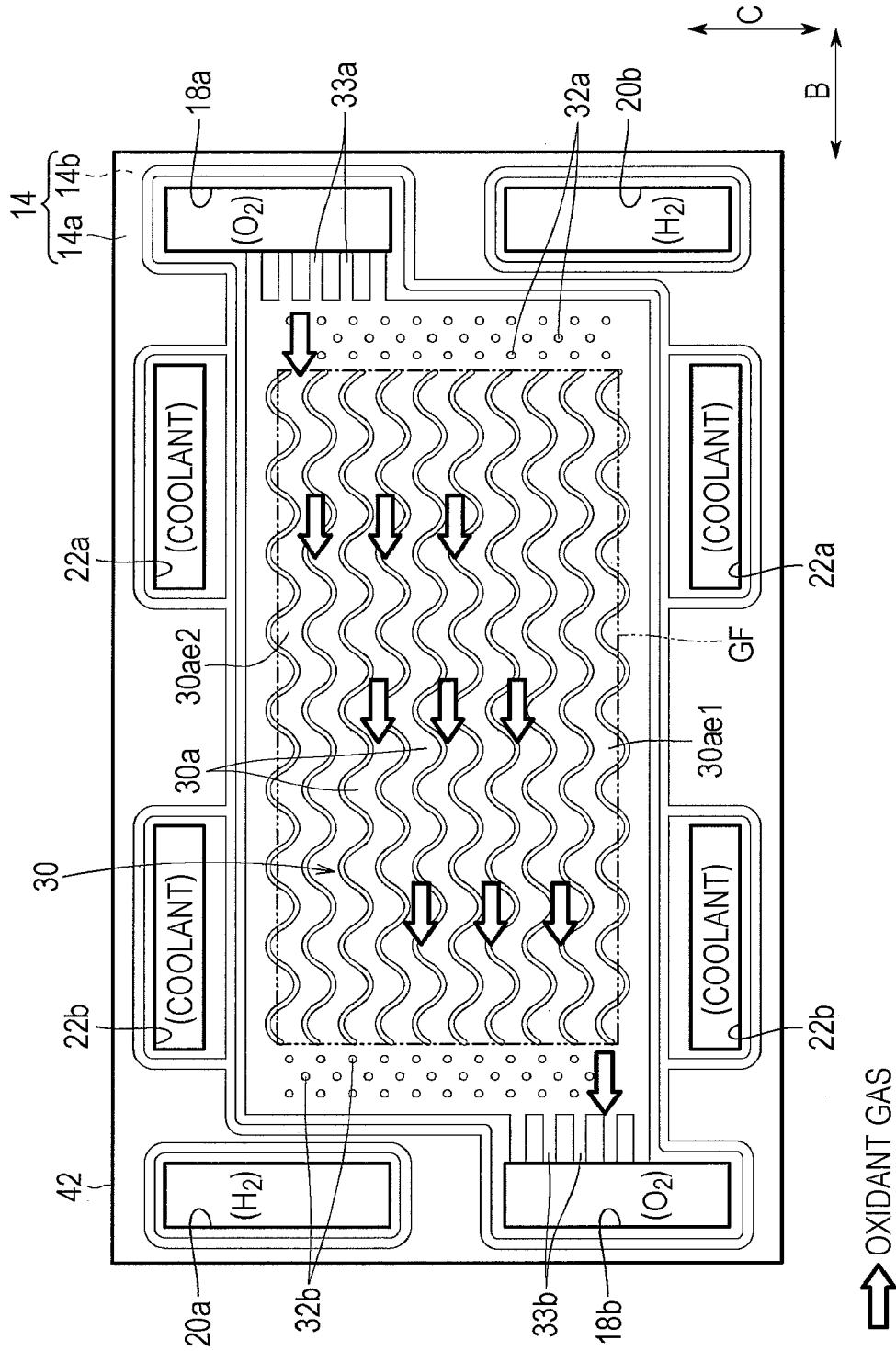


FIG. 5

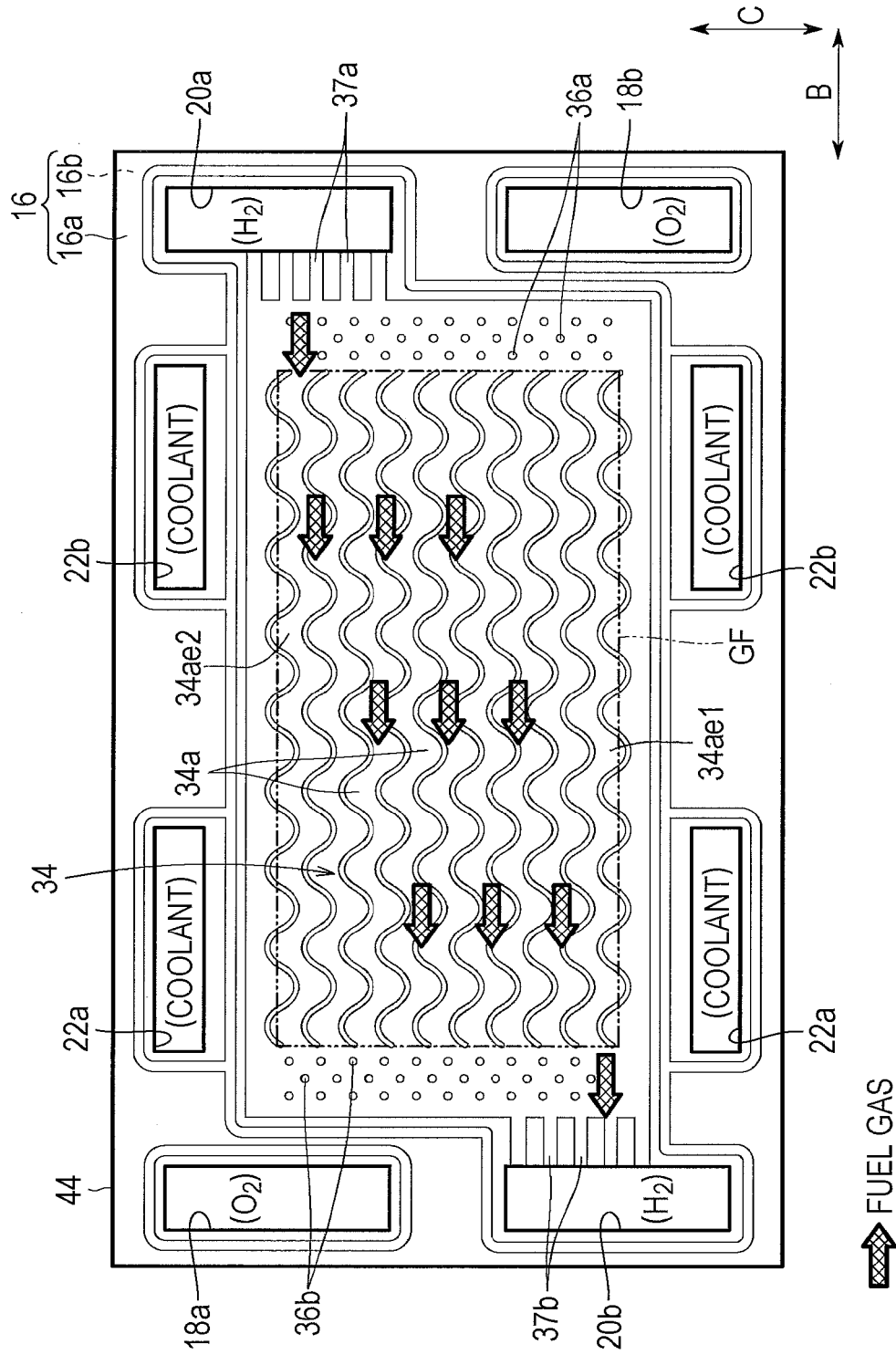


FIG. 6

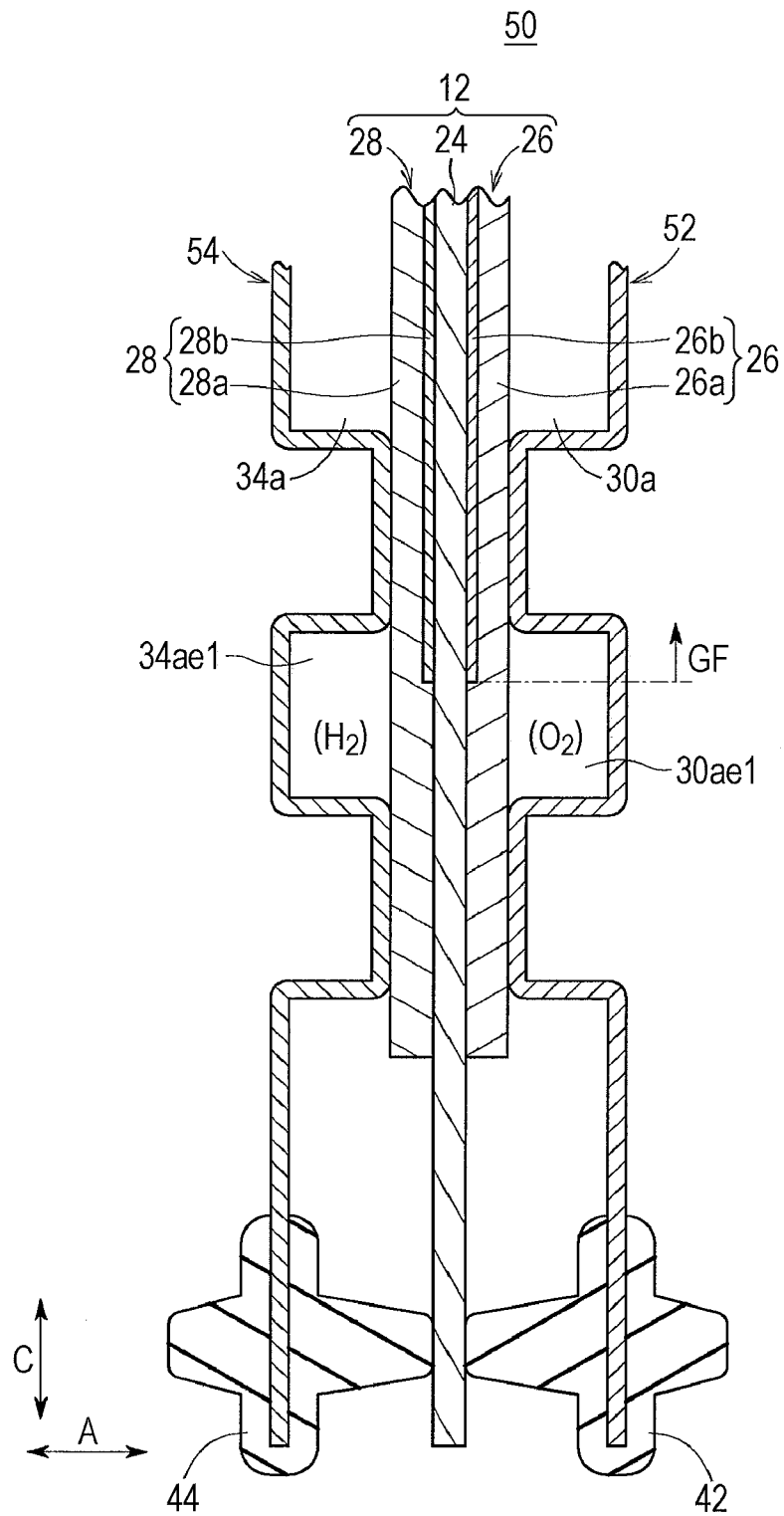


FIG. 7

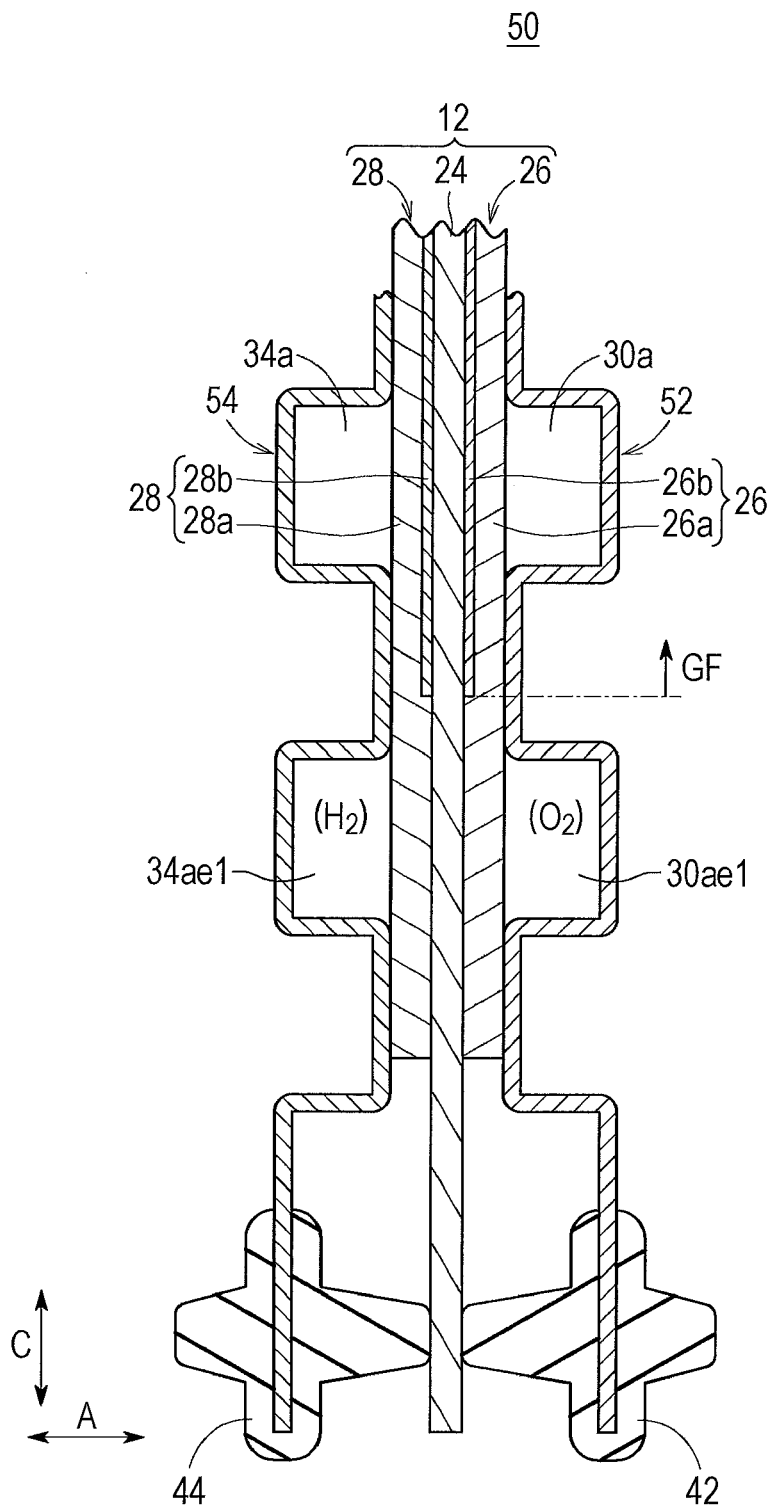


FIG. 8

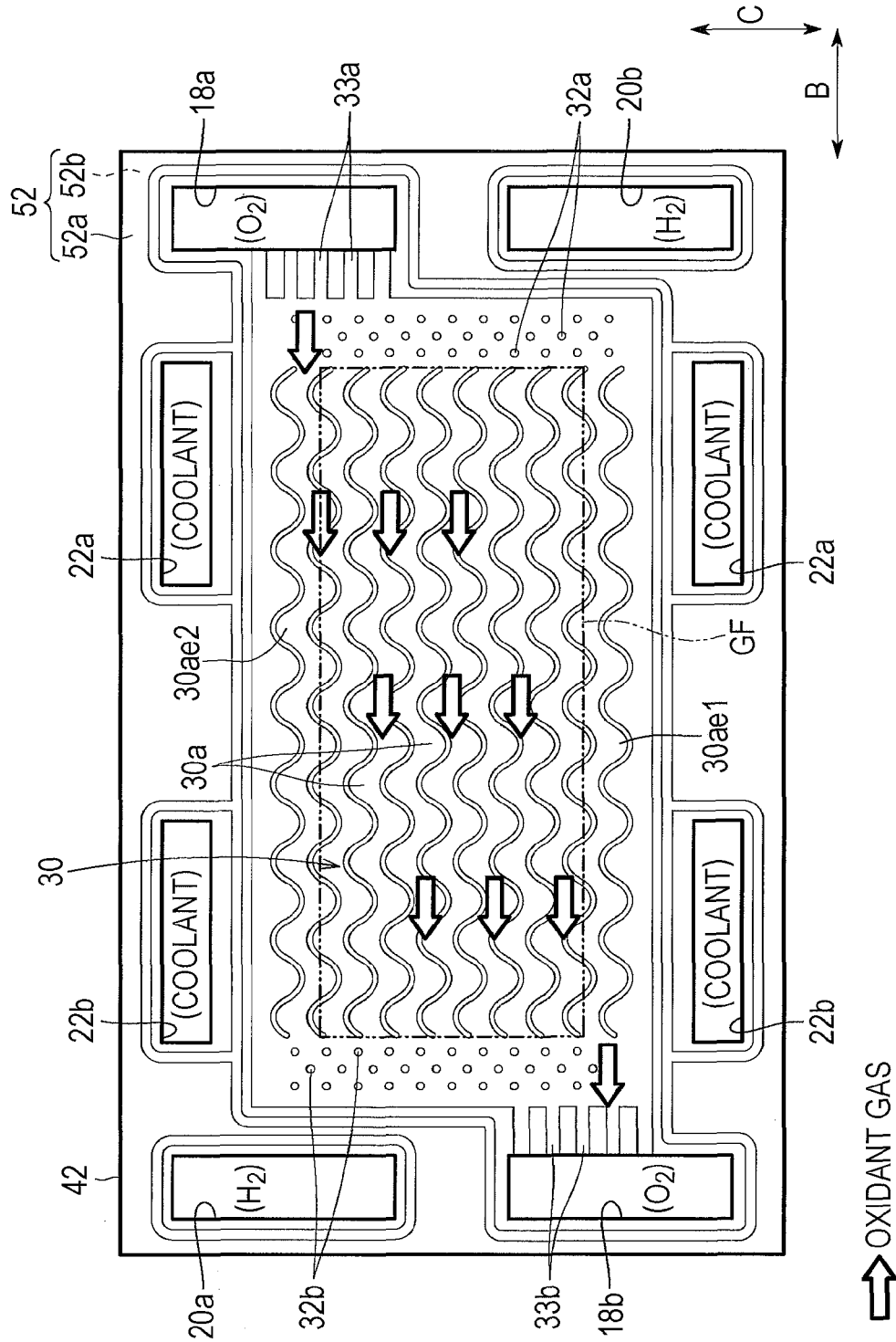
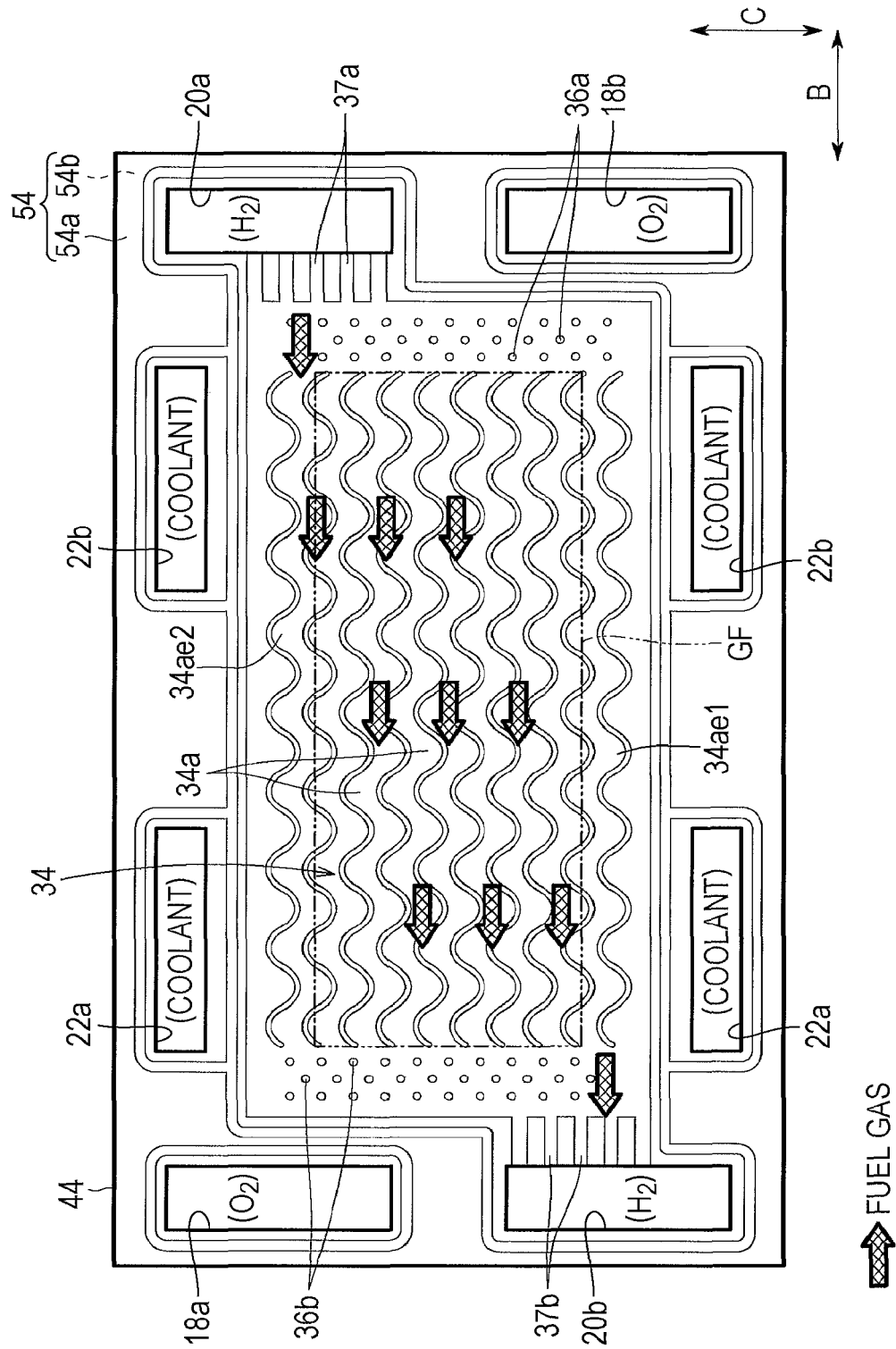


FIG. 9



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FUEL CELL HAVING AN IMPROVED GAS CHANNEL

CROSS REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application claims priority under 35 U.S.C. §119 to Japanese Patent Application No. 2012-281274, filed Dec. 25, 2012, entitled "Fuel Cell." The contents of this application are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

BACKGROUND

1. Field

The present application relates to a fuel cell.

2. Description of the Related Art

For example, a solid polymer electrolyte fuel cell includes a unit cell including a membrane electrode assembly (MEA) and a pair of separators sandwiching the MEA therebetween. The MEA includes an electrolyte membrane made from a polymer ion-exchange membrane, an anode electrode disposed on one side of the electrolyte membrane, and a cathode electrode disposed on the other side of the electrolyte membrane. Typically, a predetermined number of unit cells of this type are stacked and used as a vehicle fuel cell stack.

A fuel cell includes a metal separator that is press-formed so as to have a corrugated form. A fuel gas channel (hereinafter, also referred to as a reactant gas channel) for supplying a fuel gas to the anode electrode or an oxidant gas channel (hereinafter, also referred to as a reactant gas channel) for supplying an oxidant gas to the cathode electrode are formed in a surface of the metal separator. In each power generation cell or in each set of power generation cells, a coolant channel for supplying coolant is formed along the in-plane direction of the metal separator.

In this case, the coolant channel is formed between the back side of the fuel gas channel and the back side of the oxidant gas channel. Accordingly, in a case where a fuel gas channel and an oxidant gas channel are formed on separators each made by forming a thin metal plate so as to have a wave-like pattern, a coolant channel is formed by overlapping the wave-like shapes on the back sides of wave-shaped channels so that the phases of the wave-like shapes differ from each other.

For example, in a fuel cell described in Japanese Unexamined Patent Application Publication No. 2003-338300, at least one of a first hollow protruding portion that forms a fuel gas channel and a second hollow protruding portion that forms an oxidant gas channel is bent so that part of a top surface of the first hollow protruding portion and part of a top surface the second hollow protruding portion are separated from each other and a connection channel are formed between them. Therefore, the fuel cell can be efficiently cooled because cooling water can flow through the connection channel.

In some cases, the wave-shaped channels of the fuel gas channel and the oxidant gas channel extend in a horizontal direction. For example, in order to install a fuel cell in a space having a limited height, it is necessary that the fuel cell have a horizontally elongated shape. Accordingly, it is preferable that the fuel gas channel and the oxidant gas channel be formed so as to make the fuel gas and the oxidant gas flow in the horizontal direction.

Therefore, each of the wave-shaped channels has recessed portions that are curved or bent downward and then extend upward. Accordingly, water tends to accumulate in such

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recessed portions that are disposed at a lower position in the vertical direction. In such a recessed portion, for example, metal ions may dissolve into water from a separator and a precious metal may dissolve into water from an electrode. Thus, a problem arises in that, when the dissolved ions are trapped in an electrolyte membrane, the electrolyte membrane deteriorates and the performance of the electrodes decreases.

Moreover, in general, at end portions of an electrode, a higher tension and a higher shearing stress are likely to be applied to the electrolyte membrane than at a central portion of the electrode.

SUMMARY

According to an aspect of the present application, a fuel cell includes a membrane electrode assembly including an electrolyte membrane and a pair of electrodes sandwiching the electrolyte membrane therebetween, each of the electrodes including an electrode catalyst layer and a gas diffusion layer; a separator stacked on the membrane electrode assembly in a first horizontal direction, the separator and the membrane electrode assembly being disposed in upright positions so that electrode surfaces extend in a vertical direction; and a reactant gas channel through which a reactant gas flows along one of the electrode surfaces in a second horizontal direction, the reactant gas being an oxidant gas or a fuel gas.

In the fuel cell, the reactant gas channel includes a plurality of wave-shaped channel portions arranged in the vertical direction and each extending in the second horizontal direction so as to form a wave-like shape, and part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions that is disposed at an end in the vertical direction protrudes outward from a planar region of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an exploded perspective view of a fuel cell according to a first embodiment.

FIG. 2 is a cross-sectional view of the fuel cell taken along line II-II in FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the fuel cell taken along line in FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is a plan view of a cathode separator of the fuel cell.

FIG. 5 is a plan view of an anode separator of the fuel cell.

FIG. 6 is a partial cross-sectional view of a fuel cell according to a second embodiment.

FIG. 7 is another partial cross-sectional view of the fuel cell.

FIG. 8 is a plan view of a cathode separator of the fuel cell.

FIG. 9 is a plan view of an anode separator of the fuel cell.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

As illustrated in FIGS. 1 to 3, a plurality of fuel cells 10 according to a first embodiment are stacked in the direction of arrow A so as to form a fuel cell stack. Each of the fuel cells 10 includes a membrane electrode assembly 12, and a cathode separator 14 and an anode separator 16 sandwiching the membrane electrode assembly 12 therebetween. The membrane electrode assembly 12 and the separators 14 and 16 are stacked in a horizontal direction and disposed in upright positions so that electrode surfaces extend in the vertical direction.

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The cathode separator **14** and the anode separator **16** are each made from a thin plate, such as a steel plate, a stainless steel plate, an aluminum plate, a galvanized steel plate, or any of such thin plates having an anti-corrosive coating on the surface thereof. The separators **14** and **16** each have a corrugated cross-sectional shape formed by press-forming a thin plate so as to have a wave-like pattern. The cathode separator **14** and the anode separator **16** may be carbon separators.

As illustrated in FIG. 1, each of the cathode separator **14** and the anode separator **16** has a horizontally elongated shape having short sides extending in the vertical direction (direction of arrow C) and long sides extending in a horizontal direction (direction of arrow B) (so as to be stacked in a horizontal direction).

An oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a** and a fuel gas outlet manifold **20b** are formed in the fuel cell **10** so as to extend in the direction of arrow A through one end portion of the fuel cell **10** in the longitudinal direction (direction of arrow B). An oxidant gas, such as an oxygen-containing gas, is supplied through the oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a**. A fuel gas, such as a hydrogen-containing gas, is discharged through the fuel gas outlet manifold **20b**.

A fuel gas inlet manifold **20a** and an oxidant gas outlet manifold **18b** are formed in the fuel cell **10** so as to extend in the direction of arrow A through the other end portion of the fuel cell **10** in the longitudinal direction. The fuel gas is supplied through the fuel gas inlet manifold **20a**. The oxidant gas is discharged through the oxidant gas outlet manifold **18b**.

A pair of coolant inlet manifolds **22a** are formed in the fuel cell **10** so as to extend in the direction of arrow A through one end portions of the fuel cell **10** in the transversal direction (in the direction of arrow C). A coolant is supplied through the coolant inlet manifolds **22a**. A pair of coolant outlet manifolds **22b** are formed in the fuel cell **10** so as to extend through the other end portions of the fuel cell **10** in the transversal direction. The coolant is discharged through the coolant outlet manifolds **22b**.

The membrane electrode assembly **12** includes a solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24**, and a cathode electrode **26** and an anode electrode **28** sandwiching the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24** therebetween. The solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24** is made of, for example, a fluoropolymer or a hydrocarbon polymer.

As illustrated in FIGS. 2 and 3, the cathode electrode **26** and the anode electrode **28** respectively include gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a** and electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b**. The gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a** are made of carbon paper or the like. The electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b** are each formed on a surface of a corresponding one of the gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a** by uniformly coating the surface with porous carbon particles whose surfaces support a platinum alloy. The electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b** are formed on both sides of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24** so as to form a power generation region GF.

The gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a** have the same planar dimensions (surface area). The planar dimensions (surface area) of each of the gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a** are (is) smaller than those (that) of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24**. The electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b** have the same planar dimensions (surface area). The planar dimensions (surface area) of each of the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b** are (is) smaller than those (that) of each of the gas diffusion layers **26a** and **28a**.

The membrane electrode assembly **12** may be a so-called stepped MEA. In other words, the planar dimensions of the cathode electrode **26** may be smaller than those of the anode

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electrode **28**, or the planar dimensions of the cathode electrode **26** may be larger than those of the anode electrode **28**.

As illustrated in FIG. 4, an oxidant gas channel **30**, through which the oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a** is connected to the oxidant gas outlet manifold **18b**, is formed on a surface **14a** of the cathode separator **14** facing the membrane electrode assembly **12**. The oxidant gas channel **30** includes a plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **30a** arranged in the vertical direction and each extending in a horizontal direction in a wave-like shape. The oxidant gas channel **30** may have any appropriate shape including shapes that change periodically in the vertical direction, such as a zigzag shape or a rectangular-wave shape.

The plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **30a** include wave-shaped channel portions **30ae1** and **30ae2**, which are disposed at ends in the vertical direction. Part of each of the wave-shaped channel portions **30ae1** and **30ae2** protrudes outward from a planar region of the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b**, i.e. the power generation region GF, in the vertical direction. The wave-shaped channel portion **30ae1** is disposed at the lower end in the vertical direction, and the position of the lower end of the power generation region GF is set along lower parts of the wave-shaped channel portion **30ae1**, which are curved (or bent) downward. The wave-shaped channel portion **30ae2** is disposed at the upper end in the vertical direction, and the position of the upper end of the power generation region GF is set along upper parts of the wave-shaped channel portion **30ae2**, which are curved (or bent) upward.

An inlet buffer portion **32a** and an outlet buffer portion **32b** are respectively disposed in the vicinities of the inlet and the outlet of the oxidant gas channel **30**. Each of the inlet and outlet buffer portions **32a** and **32b** has a plurality of embossed portions. The inlet buffer portion **32a** is connected to the oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a** through a plurality of inlet connection channels **33a**. The outlet buffer portion **32b** is connected to the oxidant gas outlet manifold **18b** through a plurality of outlet connection channels **33b**.

As illustrated in FIG. 5, a fuel gas channel **34**, through which the fuel gas inlet manifold **20a** is connected to the fuel gas outlet manifold **20b**, is formed on a surface **16a** of the anode separator **16** facing the membrane electrode assembly **12**. The fuel gas channel **34** includes a plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **34a** arranged in the vertical direction and each extending in a horizontal direction in a wave-like shape. The fuel gas channel **34** may have any appropriate shape including shapes that change periodically in the vertical direction, such as a zigzag shape or a rectangular-wave shape. It is preferable that the phase of the wave-shaped channel portions **30a** on the cathode side and the phase of the wave-shaped channel portions **34a** on the anode side be the same. However, the phase of the wave-shaped channel portions **30a** and the phase of the wave-shaped channel portions **34a** may differ from each other.

The plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **34a** include wave-shaped channel portions **34ae1** and **34ae2**, which are disposed at ends in the vertical direction. Part of each of the wave-shaped channel portions **34ae1** and **34ae2** protrudes outward from the planar region of the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b**, i.e. the power generation region GF, in the vertical direction. The wave-shaped channel portion **34ae1** is disposed at the lower end in the vertical direction, and the position of the lower end of the power generation region GF is set along lower parts of the wave-shaped channel portion **34ae1**, which are curved (or bent) downward. The wave-shaped channel portion **34ae2** is disposed at the upper end in the vertical direction, and the position of the upper end of the

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power generation region GF is set along upper parts of the wave-shaped channel portion **34ae2**, which are curved (or bent) upward.

An inlet buffer portion **36a** and an outlet buffer portion **36b** are respectively disposed in the vicinities of the inlet and the outlet of the fuel gas channel **34**. Each of the inlet and outlet buffer portions **36a** and **36b** has a plurality of embossed portions. The inlet buffer portion **36a** is connected to the fuel gas inlet manifold **20a** through a plurality of inlet connection channels **37a**. The outlet buffer portion **36b** is connected to the fuel gas outlet manifold **20b** through a plurality of outlet connection channels **37b**.

A coolant channel **38** is formed between a surface **16b** of the anode separator **16** and a surface **14b** of the cathode separator **14** of an adjacent fuel cell **10** (see FIG. 1). The coolant channel **38** is connected to the pair of coolant inlet manifolds **22a** and to the pair of coolant outlet manifolds **22b**. Along the coolant channel **38**, the coolant flows over the area of the membrane electrode assembly **12** corresponding to the electrodes. An inlet buffer portion **40a** and an outlet buffer portion **40b** are respectively disposed in the vicinities of the inlet and the outlet of the coolant channel **38**.

The inlet buffer portion **40a** is connected to the coolant inlet manifolds **22a** through a plurality of inlet connection channels **41a**. The outlet buffer portion **40b** is connected to the coolant outlet manifold **22b** through a plurality of outlet connection channels **41b**.

On the surfaces **14a** and **14b** of the cathode separator **14**, a first sealing member **42** is integrally formed around the outer periphery of the cathode separator **14**. On the surfaces **16a** and **16b** of the anode separator **16**, a second sealing member **44** is integrally formed around the outer periphery of the anode separator **16**. Each of the first sealing member **42** and the second sealing member **44** is made from an elastic material such as a sealing material, a cushioning material, or a packing material. Examples of such materials include EPDM, NBR, fluorocarbon rubber, silicone rubber, fluorosilicone rubber, butyl rubber, natural rubber, styrene rubber, chloroprene-rubber, and acrylic rubber.

The operation of the fuel cell **10** will be described below.

First, as illustrated in FIG. 1, an oxidant gas, such as an oxygen-containing gas, is supplied to the oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a**. A fuel gas, such as a hydrogen-containing gas, is supplied to the fuel gas inlet manifold **20a**. A coolant, such as pure water, ethylene glycol, a cooling oil, or the like, is supplied to the pair of coolant inlet manifolds **22a**.

Therefore, the oxidant gas is introduced from the oxidant gas inlet manifold **18a** into the oxidant gas channel **30** of the cathode separator **14**. As illustrated in FIG. 4, the oxidant gas moves along the oxidant gas channel **30** in the direction of arrow B (horizontal direction), and is supplied to the cathode electrode **26** of the membrane electrode assembly **12**.

The fuel gas is supplied from the fuel gas inlet manifold **20a** to the fuel gas channel **34** of the anode separator **16**. As illustrated in FIG. 5, the fuel gas moves along the fuel gas channel **34** in the horizontal direction (direction of arrow B), and is supplied to the anode electrode **28** of the membrane electrode assembly **12** (see FIG. 1).

Accordingly, in the membrane electrode assembly **12**, the oxidant gas supplied to the cathode electrode **26** and the fuel gas supplied to the anode electrode **28** are consumed in electrochemical reactions in the electrode catalyst layers, and thereby electric power is generated.

Next, the oxidant gas, which has been supplied to the cathode electrode **26** of the membrane electrode assembly **12** and consumed, is discharged along the oxidant gas outlet manifold **18b** in the direction of arrow A. The fuel gas, which

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has been supplied to the anode electrode **28** of the membrane electrode assembly **12** and consumed, is discharged along the fuel gas outlet manifold **20b** in the direction of arrow A.

As illustrated in FIG. 1, the coolant supplied to the pair of coolant inlet manifolds **22a** is introduced into the coolant channel **38** between the cathode separator **14** and the anode separator **16**. The coolant temporarily flows inward in the direction of arrow C (vertical direction), then moves in the direction of arrow B (horizontal direction), and cools the membrane electrode assembly **12**. The coolant moves outward in the direction of arrow C and is discharged to the pair of coolant outlet manifolds **22b**.

In this case, in the first embodiment, as illustrated in FIG. 4, part of each of the wave-shaped channel portions **30ae1** and **30ae2**, which are included in the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **30a** of the oxidant gas channel **30** and which are disposed at ends in the vertical direction, protrudes outward from the planar region of the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b**, i.e. the power generation region GF, in the vertical direction. Likewise, as illustrated in FIG. 5, part of each of the wave-shaped channel portions **34ae1** and **34ae2**, which are included in the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions **34a** of the fuel gas channel **34** and which are disposed at ends in the vertical direction, protrudes outward from the planar region of the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b**, i.e. the power generation region GF, in the vertical direction.

Therefore, each of the wave-shaped channel portions **30ae1** and **30ae2** and wave-shaped channel portions **34ae1** and **34ae2** has a portion that is located outside of a reaction region. Accordingly, the chemical reaction that causes degradation at end portions of the electrodes is reduced, and thereby it is possible to suppress degradation of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24**. Thus, an advantage is obtained in that the durability of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24** is appropriately improved.

Moreover, the amounts of consumption of the fuel gas and the oxidant gas are decreased in parts of the planar regions in which the electrode catalyst layers **26b** and **28b** are not disposed. Therefore, the flow rates of the fuel gas and the oxidant gas are increased. In particular, it is possible to smoothly discharge water from the wave-shaped channel portions **30ae1** and **34ae1**, which are disposed at the lower end in the vertical direction and in which water tends to accumulate. Thus, with a simple structure, it is possible to easily and reliably discharge generated water, which tends to accumulate in lower portions of the oxidant gas channel **30** and the fuel gas channel **34** in the vertical direction, from the oxidant gas channel **30** and the fuel gas channel **34**. Accordingly, dissolved ions are not trapped in the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24**, and therefore degradation of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane **24** is suppressed and a decrease in the performance of the electrodes is prevented.

As illustrated in FIGS. 6 and 7, a fuel cell **50** according to a second embodiment includes a membrane electrode assembly **12** sandwiched between a cathode separator **52** and an anode separator **54**. The components of the fuel cell **50** that are the same as those of the fuel cell **10** according to the first embodiment will be denoted by the same numerals and detailed description of such components will be omitted. FIG. 6 is a cross-sectional view corresponding to FIG. 2 for the first embodiment, and FIG. 7 is a cross-sectional view corresponding to FIG. 3 for the first embodiment.

As illustrated in FIGS. 6 to 8, an oxidant gas channel **30** is formed on the cathode separator **52**. A wave-shaped channel portion **30ae1** of the oxidant gas channel **30** is disposed at the lower end in the vertical direction, and the position of the

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lower end of the power generation region GF is set along upper parts of the wave-shaped channel portion 30ae1, which are curved (or bent) upward. A wave-shaped channel portion 30ae2 of the oxidant gas channel 30 is disposed at the upper end in the vertical direction, and the position of the upper end of the power generation region GF is set along lower parts of the wave-shaped channel portion 30ae2, which are curved (or bent) downward.

As illustrated in FIGS. 6, 7, and 9, a fuel gas channel 34 is formed on the anode separator 54. A wave-shaped channel portion 34ae1 of the fuel gas channel 34 is disposed at the lower end in the vertical direction, and the position of the upper end of the power generation region GF is set along upper parts of the wave-shaped channel portion 34ae1, which are curved (or bent) upward. A wave-shaped channel portion 34ae2 of the fuel gas channel 34 is disposed at the upper end in the vertical direction, and the position of the upper end of the power generation region GF is set along lower parts of the wave-shaped channel portion 34ae2, which are curved (or bent) downward.

With the second embodiment having such a structure provides advantages the same as those of the first embodiment in that the durability of the solid polymer electrolyte membrane 24 is improved and water can be smoothly discharged.

Obviously, numerous modifications and variations of the present invention are possible in light of the above teachings. It is therefore to be understood that within the scope of the appended claims, the invention may be practiced otherwise than as specifically described herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A fuel cell comprising:

a membrane electrode assembly comprising:

an electrolyte membrane; and

a pair of electrodes sandwiching the electrolyte membrane therebetween, each of the pair of electrodes including an electrode catalyst layer and a gas diffusion layer;

a separator stacked on the membrane electrode assembly in a first horizontal direction, the separator and the membrane electrode assembly being disposed in upright positions so that electrode surfaces extend in a vertical direction; and

a reactant gas channel through which a reactant gas flows along one of the electrode surfaces in a second horizontal direction, the reactant gas being an oxidant gas or a fuel gas, the reactant gas channel including a plurality of wave-shaped channel portions which are arranged in the vertical direction and each of which extends in the second horizontal direction so as to form a wave-like shape, part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions is disposed at an end of the reactant gas channel in the vertical direction so as to protrude outward from a planar region of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction,

wherein the part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions extends beyond the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction, and

wherein the second horizontal direction and the vertical direction are disposed in a plane defined by the one of the electrode surfaces along which the reactant gas flows.

2. The fuel cell according to claim 1,

wherein the part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions is disposed at a lower end of the reactant gas channel in the vertical direction so as to

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protrude downward from the planar region of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction.

3. The fuel cell according to claim 1,

wherein the part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions extends beyond an outer peripheral edge of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction.

4. The fuel cell according to claim 1,

wherein the electrode catalyst layers define a power generation region, the part of at least one of the plurality of wave-shaped channel portions being disposed outside of the power generation region.

5. The fuel cell according to claim 1,

wherein the first horizontal direction is orthogonal to the plane defined by the one of the electrode surfaces along which the reactant gas flows.

6. A fuel cell comprising:

a membrane electrode assembly comprising:

an electrolyte membrane; and

a pair of electrodes sandwiching the electrolyte membrane therebetween, each of the pair of electrodes including an electrode catalyst layer and a gas diffusion layer;

a separator stacked on the membrane electrode assembly in a first horizontal direction, the separator and the membrane electrode assembly being disposed in upright positions so that electrode surfaces extend in a vertical direction; and

a reactant gas channel through which the reactant gas flows along one of the electrode surfaces in a second horizontal direction, the reactant gas being an oxidant gas or a fuel gas, the reactant gas channel including a plurality of channel portions which are arranged in the vertical direction and each of which extends in the second horizontal direction, part of at least one of the plurality of channel portions is disposed at an end of the reactant gas channel in the vertical direction so as to protrude outward from a planar region of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction,

wherein the part of the of at least one of the plurality of channel portions extends beyond the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction, and

wherein the second horizontal direction and the vertical direction are disposed in a plane defined by the one of the electrode surfaces along which the reactant gas flows.

7. The fuel cell according to claim 6,

wherein the part of at least one of the plurality of channel portions is disposed at a lower end of the reactant gas channel in the vertical direction so as to protrude downward from the planar region of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction.

8. The fuel cell according to claim 6,

wherein the part of at least one of the plurality of channel portions extends beyond an outer peripheral edge of the electrode catalyst layers in the vertical direction.

9. The fuel cell according to claim 6,

wherein the electrode catalyst layers define a power generation region, the part of at least one of the plurality of channel portions being disposed outside of the power generation region.

10. The fuel cell according to claim 6,

wherein the first horizontal direction is orthogonal to the plane defined by the one of the electrode surfaces along which the reactant gas flows.

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